

Political Ecology in Baatarzorig's Art: Mongolia *Is* in Business

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Introduction

In his very first solo exhibition, a young Mongolian artist presented his unique and unconventional self-portrait under the title *Nomad* (fig. 1). In this large painting, Baatarzorig (aka Baatra, b. 1983) showed himself as a concerned man looking down from a window into a very crowded world full of events, people, and activities without any sense of organized reality, time or place. Rendered entirely in cold hues of grayish blue, the picture appears frigidly distant and alien in its deliberate complexity and messiness; further investigation reveals its complexity *is* an inherent part of its message. Here random images of men and animals, earthly and unworldly creatures, Mongol men, and Western images of popular culture such as the ubiquitous Mickey Mouse, are mixed within a swirl of seemingly-random and odd activities. From the first glance it is clear that Baatra's work is a visual response to Mongolia's economic and political instability, which has become a particularly painful reality in the past few years. Painted in the style of traditional painting known as "Mongol Zurag" or "Mongolian picture," this painting is one of Baatra's many works that depict a controversial mixture of icons and themes that raise questions of Mongolian identity, and the politics of creating new cultural constructs in the midst of heated debates around mining. Art and politics have a long history in Mongolia dating back long before the socialist period (1924-1992). Artists' active engagement in the politics of

environmental protection, repair and commodification – prominent within the last few decades of contemporary art around the world – is a new yet increasingly important field in Mongolia. As an art historian T J Demos stated, more and more artists “address new aesthetic strategies through which current ecological emergencies have found resonance and creative response in artistic practice.”¹ As the politics of mining in Mongolia focus on debates of how to utilize the earth, how do artists such as Baatra and his colleagues respond to the commodification of nature? This article will focus on Baatra’s two paintings, the *Nomad* (2013) and *MGL* (2018) and will argue that Baatra’s works demonstrate that the marketization of nature is indeed a part of neoliberalism in Mongolia, and thus support the geographer Neil Smith’s argument of the “capitalization of nature.”² Such artistic engagement with environmental issues can also be seen internationally, and proves these issues are relevant beyond the Mongolian focus of the works concerned. How, then, does Baatarzorig help us to advance the discussion of political ecology seen in the contemporary artistic practices around the globe, and beyond Euramerica?

Baatra’s *Nomad*: Timeless Mix and “cultural disintegration”

In the *Nomad*, Baatra’s painterly world seems to unfold from right to left, as most of people and creatures are faced left creating a dynamic movement in this direction. Almost in the center of the entire composition is a tall slim figure of a Mongolian lad, dressed in a long traditional robe that has a Qing-period “water-and-mountain” pattern on its low rim. His

¹ T J Demos “Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology: An Introduction” in *Third Text*, January, 2013 Vol. 27, Issue 1, 1–9.

² Neil Smith “Nature as Accumulation Strategy” in Leo Panitch and Colin Leys eds, *Coming to Terms with Nature. Socialist Register 2007 Series*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006).

traditional boots and an equally ancient male accessory of a flint lighter box attached to the lad's belt, are all distinctly archaic.³ This figure is undoubtedly a Mongolian, and a Mongolian from some 200 years ago who is now marching under a stern gaze of a contemporary Mongolian Baatra. With a shining golden robot ("Iron man"?) right above his head and annexed by two figures of Mickey Mouse to his immediate right (viewer's left), the lad's identity as "Mongolian" is of a particular meaning here as he is surrounded by figures and indices of multiculturalism where a lack of the central logic and of its leader is alarmingly distinct.

The years of Baatra's growth as an artist were prevailed with angst of new economic and political developments due to the fall of socialist government in 1992. The country was on ration cards and experienced dire poverty with many parents, especially fathers, leaving overseas (i.e. to South Korea) to make money for their families. The process of transition from the socialist state to a market economy has been fraught with outcomes tangible in all layers of social, political and cultural life. Baatra's vivid memories of his pain and struggle for survival while a youngster and later as an emerging artist sustain his artwork from 2005 until now. In 2005, Baatra graduated from the Fine Arts college in Ulaanbaatar as a student of a Mongol Zurag artist Ts. Narmandakh, and also joined the Mongol Zurag Society formed in 2002.⁴

³ Flint-and-steel boxes for lighting pipes were typical male accessory carried with him at all times together with a bowl, chopsticks, and a knife, all attached to the belt. Men took pride in the shape, design, and make of their accessories, especially of their flint lighters as they displayed smith work of various quality based on the price of its commission. Some of these accessories were exquisite works of metal work and cost a good amount of money. See more on crafts in Nyam-Osoryn Tsultem, *Decorative Arts* (Ulaanbaatar: State Publishing House, 1988).

⁴ See more about Mongol Zurag in Uranchimeg Tsultemin, "Mongol Zurag: Nyam-Osoryn Tsultem (1923-2001) and Traditional-style Painting in Mongolia" in *Orientations*, 48/2, March-April 2017, Hong Kong, 135-142. About Mongol Zurag Society, see Uranchimeg Tsultemin, *Mongolin orchin uyeiin dursleh urlagiin Eh Survalj, barimt bichguud* [Primary Documents of Mongolian Art Associations] (Ulaanbaatar: BCI Publishing, 2018).

Several scholars have written about Mongolia's current issues of political and economical instability that affected the society and culture at large. Li Narangoa calls our attention to the current state of "divided urbanism–pastoralism, in which both the new urban citizenry and the pastoral communities are under the complex rule of a new city-based elite, international institutions and the market."⁵ D. Bum-Ochir, referring to statements by the Council of Europe, argued that democracy in Mongolia "dysfunctional" due to the lack of "professional, institutionalised, formalised and legally-protected permanent political opposition."⁶

In the *Nomad*, a tall figure of a Mongol lad from the past takes center-stage as any sign of current leadership is absent, and marches towards left to confront jolly figures with Mickey Mouse heads, clad in suits and ties. Mickey Mouse, as the clear index of the "West" here in the painting finds himself amidst a messy crowd consisting of a sumo wrestler, thirteenth-century Chinggis Khaan and his warriors, nineteenth-century Mongols, a samurai in his full armor, Buddhist monks, strangers and beggars, modern men in suits, symbols borrowed from Buddhist paintings and folktales, and the like. Further down below the Mickey Mouse, we see a slim figure of "Uncle Sam" as a visual index of the US—an old man with a goatee wearing a tail coat and a top hat. Below them, strange people appear in what looks like a black convertible with a hood shaped as a bull. These distinct social and cultural associations suggest a milieu governed by neoliberalism, as the worlds of the robot, allegories and visual tropes of the West, the East and

⁵ Li Narangoa and Ole Bruun "A New Moment in Mongol History: The Rise of the Cosmopolitan City" in Ole Bruun and Li Narangoa eds., *Mongols From Country to City: Floating Boundaries, Pastoralism and City Life in the Mongol Lands* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2006).

⁶ D. Bum-Ochir "Democracy without opposition: Dominant parties, the election, and the lack of an opposition in Mongolia" blogpost, 2015. In his statement, Bum-Ochir refers to Angelika Nussenberger, Özbudun, E., and Sejersted, F. "On the Role of the Opposition in a Democratic Parliament." [Online] (Strasbourg: Council of Europe and Venice Commission, 2010), 7. Available: [http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2010\)025-e](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2010)025-e)

the Mongol past are all assembled together with visual indices of “Mongolness.” As the dynamics of the movement and heads and bodies are turned to the left, the artist implies the main direction is towards the Mickeys and Uncle Sam. Highlighted at the composition’s center within the messiness of this crowd is a direct encounter of the Mongol fellow with the Mickeys, annexed by a hybrid giraffe-like animal whose natural habitat is certainly not Mongolia.

The artist recalls how as a youngster he witnessed the day-to-day transformation of Mongolia, then deemed as progressive “globalization” with icons of the Western and East Asian culture promptly entering into the Mongolian quotidian. The superficial and immediate impact of this process was on contemporary culture, as the popular visuals of Mickey Mouse and the Disney world in general were quickly imported, taking prominent place amongst the native Mongol cultural icons. Uradyn Bulag described this process of cultural adaptation and transformation as “alter/native modernity,” that is, separate from the vision of modernity as different and, as such, “alternative” to the Western paradigm.⁷ “Mickey Mouse is the index of the Western popular culture” remarks Baatra and suggests that his main concern is “a question of whether Mongolia is really Mongolia nowadays. The Mongolia of the past [meaning traditional] is long gone; how Mongolia retains its identity is my question.”⁸ He identifies the Mickey Mouse figure as a clear index of a Western mass-oriented popular culture now promptly imported into Mongolia.

⁷ By taking on a new interpretation of Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar’s “Alternative modernity,” Uradyn Bulag offers a different approach especially in the case of Inner and Outer Mongolia, where native cultural values are superseded by new cultural import. As Bulag defines it, “alter/native modernity, that is, not just an alternative Chinese [or Western] modernity but one which hinges on altering the native Mongol cultural and political institutions and properties.” See Uradyn Bulag in Li Narangoa and Ole Bruun eds., *Mongols from Country to City: Floating Boundaries, Pastoralism and City Life in the Mongol Lands* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2006), Chapter 3.

⁸ Interview with the artist, December 2017, March 2018.

Baatra's earliest references to his critique of westernization in Mongolia began in 2010 with a small painting titled *Red Water* (fig. 2). During the twentieth century "Red water" (or *ulaan us* in Mongolian) used to be a generic reference to a soda, due to the fact that the only locally-produced soda that existed in Mongolia had a red color. In this painting, one can see Baatra's first experiments with culturally hybridized motifs and ideas, with a coca-cola can set against a rural scene with a camel and a countryside boy. Both looking sad, with a clear red reflection of the coca-cola can in the camel's eye, the painting's red background and the stern look of the boy, all alert the viewer to the artist's intended provocations. In 2010, Baatra painted several small size images of this kind: minimalistic compositions with only a handful of motifs and figures strongly suggestive in their intentional juxtaposition, appearance and color choices, and typically set on a plain background. His media at this time, as evidenced by such works as *Go To Mongolia* and *What a Wonderful World* (fig. 3-4) also included wooden panels that were stripped of old doors, antique wardrobes and chest-boards and sold at Ulaanbaatar's flea markets. These two images take their motifs entirely from Euramerica— the first is using a cover image of the Beatles from their 1969 album *Abbey Road* and the second shows a smiling Louis Armstrong with his clarinet clasped under his armpit. In both cases, these famous figures are drawn amidst symbols and signs of auspicious clouds, vegetation and landscape imagery that aims to dislodge these figures from their original context, forging new associations with Mongolia.

Developing these ideas throughout his subsequent works, such as the *Nomad*, Baatra aptly points out the superficiality of his situation as timeless, rather than one of transience or of transition. Baatra locates himself in this gray milieu without any direct political references, where, instead, every figure is an index for a specific item of import, evoking a revisionist

outlook at Mongolia's own past following the end of a socialist taboo on the celebration of national heroes and historical makers (post-1990). As historian Morris Rossabi observed in 2005, the process of reforms in Mongolia entailed a marked emphasis on "ethnic traditions (Buddhism, Chinggis Khan, customary dress, etc.) that had been portrayed negatively in the communist era, and patriotism, which often verged on anti-Russian attitudes."⁹ Hence we have an odd plethora of thirteenth and nineteenth-century Mongol figures, images of folktales and Buddhist monks, mingled with other signposts denoting East Asian and Western cultures. Exchanging 'matters of fact' for 'matters of concern,' Baatra's troubled gaze indicates rather "an epistemological critique of the very assumptions of scientific authority that could lead to a democratic politics."¹⁰

Through his visual rendering of neoliberalism, where nothing seems to make any sense (hence the rabbits in suits, a gigantic giraffe in the center, a naked driver of a limousine with a bull head, a pig-headed gentleman with a suitcase, etc. etc.) – he agrees with the concern of "cultural disintegration" raised by Narangoa and Ole Bruun.¹¹ The two scholars see the Mongol nation divided by "polarized orientations and lifestyles" in the City and Country. Yet for the artist, it is the reality of reckless hybridization, an oblivious attitude of people in power, their deliberate neglect and ignorance that has resulted in an uncanny blend of new cultural constructs. In other words, for Baatra, it is not merely a "cultural disintegration," but on a deeper level, it is a

⁹ Morris Rossabi *Modern Mongolia: From Khans to Commissars to Capitalists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 29.

¹⁰ Demos, 3 referring to Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, Catherine Porter, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2004). Demos describes Bruno Latour's vision of political ecology, where "Latour envisages new inclusive assemblies of humans and nonhumans, offering creative ways of thinking about alternative modes of governance wherein ecological sustainability, the defense of biodiversity and the rights of multitudinous life forms and environmental objects could be newly considered."

¹¹ Bruun and Narangoa, 2.

formation of an alter/native cultural paradigm that is essentially apocalyptic and is akin to, as we shall in the next section, other facets of Mongolia's neoliberal governance.

Baatra's *MGL*: "Nature banking" and the Ideas of Protection

According to political scientist Julian Dierkes, the failing fluctuations of the Mongolian economy are triggered by the "shock therapy" instituted in early 1990s "to replace the planned economy with free-wheeling capitalism," where the privatization of livestock and the land as well as adoption of the mining law in 1997 resulted in radical changes beyond economy and politics alone.¹² Much of Baatra's work after 2013 and works by other artists, such as Ya. Bulgan and B. Nandin-Erdene since the 1990s, Ch. Baasanjav, E. Lkhagvadorj, and B. Orkhontuul from 2009 (as we shall see later) all respond visually to the massive political and economical dismay of the country that affected all layers of Mongolian society. In his most recent work, titled *MGL* (fig. 5-6), produced as a part of a new exhibition *Five Heads (Tavan Tolgoi)* at University College London,¹³ and which consists of two canvases, Baatra's show of cultural disintegration is enhanced by the environmental issues caused by active mining. In the first canvas (fig. 5), the artist depicts a blue gentleman in a suit with the head of a deer. As he tells me, he built this hybrid figure in the wake of an exorcism ritual that took place three years ago to condemn the then-Prime Minister Ch. Saikhanbilig for signing the \$5.4 bn agreement in 2015 with the world's

¹² Julian Dierkes "Introduction" in Julian Dierkes ed., *Change in Democratic Mongolia: Social Relations, Health, Mobile Pastoralism, and Mining* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 7. Dierkes does not explain which laws he refers to as "mining law."

¹³ The exhibition is aimed at bringing an international group of scholars and artists as an interactive collaboration of ethnographic field research and of artistic responses and engagement. Curated by Hermione Spriggs, the title of the exhibition points at Mongolia's richest coal mine that consists of five mounts (hence, 'five heads' in Mongolian). As the curator states, "The exhibition maps an exchange of materials and perspectives extracted and mobilised between the geosphere and human culture, and between anthropology and art in Mongolia and London."

largest conglomerate of mining Rio Tinto. Claiming that “Mongolia is back to business,”¹⁴ that agreement was to allow the underground development of Oyu Tolgoi mine, known as the world’s richest repository of copper.¹⁵ Mongolia boasts of being a home to the richest mines in the world, the estimate of which is said to be up to \$1tn.¹⁶ Regardless of this potential, the majority of people remain extremely impoverished, and the signed agreement is not seen favorably by the Mongols. Just a few weeks after the agreement was signed, a life size effigy of Saikhanbileg, seen here as an evil traitor, was burnt at an exorcist ritual shared by both shamans and Buddhists.¹⁷ Reflecting on this dramatic incident, and inspired by ethnographic texts by Mongolian anthropologist D. Bum-Ochir, Baatra partakes in the heated debates on mining and the environmental problems it issues forth.

Akin to the *Nomad*, the diptych shows a bizarre mix of hybrid creatures, monstrous beings, humans with animal heads, people of both past and modern times and indices and symbols of multinational cultures from the past and present. Here we see mountains and cliffs pierced and converted into multiple rooms and all occupied by various monstrous creatures with human bodies and animal heads, which are Baatra’s ingenious visualization of a Mongolian phrase *khun turuhuu aldsan* that literally translates to “lost his human appearance.” The artist’s specific use of mountains is an effort to show the inhumanity of the nature’s destruction, through

¹⁴ D. Bum-Ochir, “Mongolia’s ‘strategic mine’ and the conflict between civil society, national government, and foreign investors” in *Emerging Subject Blog*, UCL, June 30, 2015.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Rio Tinto and Mongolia sign multibillion dollar deal on mine expansion” *The Guardian*, May 19, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2015/may/19/rio-tinto-and-mongolia-sign-multibillion-dollar-deal-on-mine-expansion>

¹⁷ D. Bum-Ochir, *op. cit.*

a visual pun on the meaning of the English word ‘mining’ which in Mongolian can be literally translated as “mine [of] mountains” (*uul uurkhai*). The painting depicts figures that are metaphorical and representative of the key constituents active in the debate and the business of mining as well as specific images that represent its questionable outcome: herders, businessmen and politicians in suits, men and women of the Mongol present and of the past as well as familiar indices of the West in the guise of the Uncle Sam and the Mickey Mouse.

The essential Mongol belief in the spirituality of mountains is represented by a pink figure under a row of sacred mountains – here standing for the national park of the Bogd Mountain, where Saikhanbilig was condemned and his effigy was burnt – the hybrid figure is made deliberately grotesque and visually domineering in the center of the composition. The spirit of the mountain, or the energy and force of it as Baatra claims, is powerful – although nobody can fully comprehend its otherworldly subjectivity and its potential. Here the wrinkled and distorted mountain ‘spirit’ appears odd and out of place. It is swallowing the moon and its Mickey Mouse ears align it with the other strange hybrid creatures spread around its neighborhood. To the right of the pink ‘spirit’ is the figure of the Uncle Sam familiar from the *Nomad*, whilst a man in a suit with a Mickey Mouse head appears just above the ‘spirit.’ A naked figure of a herder in the lap of the ‘spirit’ is contrasted against a fully-clad man in a suit as if to remind us that the capitalization of nature by business and political elites did indeed strip the local residents of their pastures and of their belongings.

There are no mountains left untouched by the hybrid human-animal beings, and the dotted landscape all around clearly marks what geographer Neil Smith has called “nature-banking,” as such “intensified commodification, marketization and financialization of nature is

of course an integral element of a much larger project of neoliberalism.”¹⁸ Bum-Ochir could not agree more as he states, “Mongolia’s state strategizing and regulation of its major mines is a deliberate political move against the “governance of the global free market economy” (also addressed with term neoliberalism) that restricts control of the national government.”¹⁹

As an artistic response, the idea of protection is explored in the guise of a dangerously fierce dog galloping on a horse in full armor as a divine protector of the herd and of the encampment (here, the local community). Building this figure on a traditional belief that dog barks eliminate danger, Baatra depicts this dog as holding a spear in his arm and barking at the Mickey Mouse and the modern men and women as he aims to ward the evils away. The dog is galloping towards the second canvas (fig. 6).

The second canvas with the dotted landscape of mined mountains and hills contains at its center a red warrior on a horse clad in full armor and holding a long spear in his arm. Mimicking the dog-protector, this human protector-figure visually connects the two paintings in the overall message of the artist’s wish for the safeguarding of his community. The red warrior is a rich trope layered with several associations which include a Shambhala king Rudracakrin, the name of Mongolia’s capital city Ulaanbaatar that translates as “Red Hero,” a red-colored Buddhist wrathful protector Jamsran who is favored by the Mongols, and features in a well-known painting by Russian artist Nicholas Roerich’s (1874-1947) of a Red Hero (in Zanabazar Museum of Fine Arts, Ulaanbaatar).

¹⁸ Smith, 20.

¹⁹ Bum-Ochir, *op. cit.*

Exuding flames of fire, Rudrachakrin sweeps into the disturbed terrain and guides his horse to step with its front hooves over a hybrid, multi-bodied creature riding a two-bodied bull. This bull stands for two dominant parties, its red body representing the People's Party and the blue body standing for the Democratic Party, collectively known as MANAN since their coalition in 2008.²⁰ Whereas the polycephalic rider's heads point at self-destruction, the direction of his movement targeted is towards the Mickey Mouse. This type of rendering, where a major figure in the composition confronts an icon of the American popular culture, is reminiscent of the *Nomad*: in both cases, such confrontation is shown as immediate, unavoidable, and closely associated with the "capitalization of nature" and the destruction it brings. The whole idea of Shambhala, a mythical land somewhere in the North that is a paradise free of enemies (as they would be all defeated by Rudrachakrin), is in itself a powerful millenarian statement. Baatra thus specifically chooses the figure of the red warrior as his multi-layered connotations all herald a long-awaited positive outcome: protection, victory and the coming of a better age.²¹ It is deliberate and meaningful that the figure in a boat – the famous environmentalist Ts. Munkhbayar – is right underneath the red protector. Munkhbayar is the first and only internationally recognized recipient of 2007 Goldman Environmental Prize and here he is balancing himself in the troubled waters with a goat and a wolf – a domestic herbivore and a

²⁰ Bum-Ochir elaborates on the state of two Mongolian political parties in "Democracy without opposition: Dominant parties, the election, and the lack of an opposition in Mongolia." *Emerging Subjects Blog*. 2015.

²¹ Rudrachakrin is the last of twenty-five kings of an utopian land of Shambhala, where people would live in paradise and peace after the defeat of "barbarians" by Rudrachakrin. See more on Shambhala Edwin Bernbaum, *The Way to Shambhala: A Search for the Mystical Kingdom Beyond the Himalayas* (Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1980). Jamsran or Begze is one of ten *dharmapālas* or Buddhist protectors, particularly popular with the Mongols in the nineteenth-early twentieth centuries. About Nicholas Roerich's interest in Shambhala, see Nicholas Roerich, *Shambhala* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1930)

wild predator – at his two sides.²² Supported by the animal world, Munkhbayar and his work is all about protection and environmental restoration, here visually aided by the mythical figure of Rudrachakrin and the armed force of the Dog, the Protector.

Artists for Environment Protection in Mongolia

Baatra's interests in politico-ecological innovations were preceded and inspired by highly successful experimental paintings by his colleague Ch. Baasanjav (aka Baaska, b. 1977). Baaska studied Mongol Zurag in the same class of traditional painting at the fine art college in Ulaanbaatar. Both trained by the same artist, Narmandakh, they were inspired to explore experimentation with references to the Mongol past without limiting themselves to the ubiquitous images of Mongol warriors. Narmandakh emphasized engagement with the richness of Mongol traditional culture, nomadic heritage and its history, all of which was heavily suppressed and largely limited prior to 1990. The teacher's aims with such education was to implicitly urge to creatively re-think the well-informed vision of "Mongolness;" of what it really means to be a Mongol (and a Mongolian) in the contemporary era.

Baaska's approach to rethinking Buddhist teachings gave birth to strikingly new iconographies and novel possibilities to interpret Buddhist motifs in relation to the modern

²² Ts. Munkhbayar is known for his longtime work to protect his native land and the Onggi River, which dried up due to the mining activities. Munkhbayar co-founded the Onggi River Movement as well as Mongolian Nature Protection Coalition to protect the shrinking of rivers and waterways. In 2006, the government passed a new Law on Minerals that protects natural water basins and regulates mining. See more on Munkhbayar's successful efforts for environment protection at <https://www.goldmanprize.org/recipient/tsetsegee-munkhbayar/> . However, there were also recent controversies surrounding Munkhbayar's work questioning his efforts and subsequently sentencing him to 21 years in prison in 2013. This incident, according to T. Enkhbat quoted by numerous media, reveals the desperation of Mongolian herders and their fight against the environmental damage due to mining. See more at <http://world.time.com/2014/01/28/award-winning-mongolian-environmentalist-gets-21-years-for-terrorism/>

concerns of contemporary Mongolia. In his first solo exhibition in 2006, Baaska exhibited large-scale works that show refined drawing and composite narratives reminiscent of the monk B. Sharav's (1869-1939) paintings in the early twentieth century. Sharav's *Daily Events* and *Airag Feast* show witty quotidian scenes of herders in Mongolian countryside.²³ The Buddhist painter's outstandingly liberal and ingenious articulation of Buddhist ideals through humorous images inspired Baaska to further his inventive application of the Mongol Zurag style in relation to contemporary events in his country. The result was his first highly successful painting *The Taste of Money In-Between Clouds* (fig. 7) which he completed in 2009 and which was immediately selected for a group show organized by his fellow artist M. Erdenebayar.²⁴ The same year a Hong Kong-based art dealer Tzong-tzung (Johnson) Chang included this work in the first Mongolian exhibition at his prestigious HanArt Gallery in Hong Kong, titled *From Steppe to Urban Dynamics*, and later purchased it for his permanent collection.²⁵

In *The Taste of Money*, Baaska reflected on all the heated debates and controversies surrounding the mining and distraught politics around the time of then-President N. Bagabandi's stepping down. As Baaska recalls, there were many important issues under discussion in parliamentary sessions as well as amongst ordinary Mongolians, and he wanted to include visual

²³ See more in-depth analyses of Sharav's unique paintings in Uranchimeg Tsultemin "Cartographic Anxieties in Mongolia: The Bogda Khan's Picture-Map." *Cross Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, December 2016 (online issue), May 2017 (hard copy): 66-87; Tsultemin, "A Case of Allegoresis: A Buddhist Painter and His Patron in Mongolia" forthcoming, *Artibus Asiae*, Zürich: Museum Rietberg, Switzerland, fall 2018.

²⁴ About a prominent Mongolian artist M. Erdenebayar, see several articles by Ian Findlay-Brown including "Horses Move Into Town" in *World Sculpture News*, vol. 23, n. 4, Autumn 2017, "Guardians of the Steppe" in *Asian Art News*, November-December 2009.

²⁵ The exhibition was the largest of its kind shown in Hong Kong and included twenty two artists. See more about it at <https://blog.artron.net/space.php?uid=84420&do=blog&id=696405>

reflections on all of them. In the center of the crowded composition is a domineering large figure of a man in a black suit with multiple arms and three heads wearing paper hats made of daily newspapers. The titles of the newspapers read “This”, “Today” and “Truth” and are here meaningful beyond being just newspaper titles. The man, who represents the three highest authorities of the Government – President, Prime Minister and Chairman of the *Ikh Khural* (Parliament) – is surrounded by the seventy-six members of the parliament, who all appear to have “lost their human appearance”—that is, all having horns, animal heads or turned into skeletons, bird-like, or other hybrid creatures. Gods, spirits and both mountain and river *nagas* (spirits of underworld and waters) are gathered and appear together in front of the man of authority, presenting a written appeal that reads “Please leave to us, those who belong to mountains and rivers, our virgin land and our flowing rivers!” The man of authority, however, is holding a hammer and dollar bills in his hands, and thus his interest is evidently not in favor of environmental protection. His stance is clearly supported by the members of the parliament and a monstrous white beast in a business shirt and a red tie, who emerges clutching a pickaxe from amongst the session members to yelp in anger at the appealing gods and spirits.

In another work titled *At the Session* (2011) (fig. 8), which appears as a sequel to *The Taste of Money*, we see a similar composition with a central multi-armed polycephalic rider surrounded by seventy-six members of the parliament in session. The central rider’s face is now red-and-blue representing the two leading parties (as we also saw in Baatra’s *MGL*) and his paper hat bears the English words “Truth” “Paradise” and “Hell.” Here the seventy-six parliament members have all turned into skeletons, and thus the session is essentially a gathering of the dead. Even the horse of the rider is polycephalic, each head looking in different directions

suggesting the disunity of the parties, as well as the restricted choices that the riders (that is, the Mongols) have at their disposal. The rider is clutching a sword that in traditional Buddhist iconography aims to ‘cut’ ignorance and bring in knowledge with a book. Here, however, the book is completely absent and is replaced with an empty throne, suggesting Mongolia’s lack of a true leader to guide the country out of this hellish state. The entire arrangement of the session is based on the iconography of a “Buddhist Refuge Field” (*tsogshin*), known and represented as a huge gathering of teachers atop of a wish-fulfilling tree; here, the dried roots of the deadly tree below are tied with chopped human heads. Orchestrated by the lead ‘conductor,’ who is no less than the Lord of Death, Yama, the painting’s message is rather morbid and gruesome.

While some artists – such Ya. Bulgan, B. Nandin-Erdene, E. Lkhagvadorj, B. Orkhontuul – were among the first to initiate a new approach to depict the dark side of democratic Mongolia (namely, victims of Mongolia’s poverty and social injustice who include orphans and street children who are sold as organ donors, young girls who choose to become prostitutes, children and women suffering from various forms of harassment and domestic violence,) *The Taste of Money* is the first politico-ecological work made in Mongolia by a contemporary artist. Specifically targeting the dire situation concerning a newly-neoliberal government and the marketization of nature, and explicitly appealing to political powers, Baaska initiated a new trend that focuses on political ecology and inspired several of his fellow artists, who include Baatra and his exceptional works.

Conclusion

The two works by a Mongolian artist Baatra, the *Nomad* and *MGL*, articulate in visual terms the complex nature of Mongolia's transition from a closed and isolated country to a "global" world marked by inconsistent references to its own past, new cultural constructs, nebulous and confused by its present and its future. Baatra here joins several of his contemporary artist fellows who question the haphazard neoliberal politics that have brought a lasting disenchantment with Mongolia's democracy, as their art visualizes how contemporary Mongolia's cultural and social affiliations are seriously "lost in translation."

While Baatra largely agrees with Narangoa and Bruun's concern with "cultural disintegration" in Mongolia, he and his colleague Baaska see the globalization process resulting in the creation of new, hybrid cultural constructs that are essentially integral to the destruction of environment and to the politics of neoliberal governance. The stride of neoliberalism, as Smith has shown, is most tangible in the marketization and commodification of nature as it happened in the US in 1980-1990s (in the case of Smith's study), and it is now happening in Mongolia. While the specifics of Mongolia's environmental struggle are well captured in such rituals as burning the wrongful Prime Minister's life-size effigy on a sacred mountain, many international artists, art historians and curators have addressed similar issues of rapid industrialization, environmental damage and poorly-planned urbanization that has affected dislocation of people globally.²⁶ Art historian Caroline Turner, defining "Critical Themes, Geopolitical Change and Global Contexts in Contemporary Asian Art" points out some exact themes – such as "an increased consumerism and materialism and societies in which huge inequities and social issues remain to be resolved" –

²⁶ Caroline Turner, commenting on the work of an Indian artist Tushar Joag, *Riding Rocinante: from Bombay to Shanghai* (2010) in Michelle Antoinette and Caroline Turner eds., *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-making* (Canberra: The Australian National University Press, 2014), 5-10.

which are also Baatra's focus in his art. Her comment on "rapid transformations" in Asia seem also to echo the same case within Mongolia. Geeta Kapur's seminal work is also pertinent to Baatra and his colleagues as they all show how "a political society whose constituencies are redefining the meaning of democracy" is in ferment.²⁷ Likewise, the Philippines-based art historian and curator Patrick Flores' analysis of artistic practices in Southeast Asia – responding to a condition of nature he designates as apocalyptic – can be easily addressed to Baatra's works, as they exist as "the interventive documentation of the destruction of the ground on which the failure of civilization and modernity stand."²⁸

My point here is that Baatra's work is not of and about Mongolia only, but is truly representative of artistic processes happening across the globe. Paraphrasing the former Prime Minister's now famous words, we might as well say then that "Mongolia *is* in business"—the business of globalization and its discontents. Mongolian artists, such as Baatra, have been actively taking part in the critique and disclosure of the alarming situation of neoliberalism, a state of being that has brought our Earth and nature into direct confrontation with environmental apocalypse.

²⁷ Geeta Kapur, 'Dismantled Norms: Apropos other Avantgardes', in Caroline Turner ed., *Tradition and Change*, (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993), 97. Quoted in Turner 2014: 5.

²⁸ Patrick D. Flores "Delicacy and Danger" In *Third Text*, January, 2013, Vol. 27, Issue 1, 95–107.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1. *Nomad*



“Nomad” 2013

acrylic,canvas (100x150cm)

Fig. 2.



“Red water” 2010

(70x55cm) acrylic,canvas

Fig. 3-4



Fig. 5. MGL-2



Fig. 6. MGL-2



Fig. 7. Ch. Baasnajv *The Taste of Money In-Between Clouds*, 2009



Fig. 8. Ch. Baasanjav *During Session* 2011

